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A Vigilant Congress Is Key to Effective U.S. Intelligence

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When I joined the House Select Committee on Intelligence four years ago, members willing to serve on this obscure panel were so few that those who reluctantly took committee posts did so almost out of a sense of duty. Intelligence is now the most popular assignment, and a large share of this new interest has been generated by covert action, those secret efforts in support of our foreign policy not publicly attributable to the United States.

Covert action in Central America has raised questions about the budgetary and accounting procedures for intelligence, and more seriously, about the trustworthiness of high-ranking intelligence officials.

Although covert action takes a small part of the intelligence budget, it consumes an enormous amount of executive and congressional attention. Large-scale paramilitary action is hard to control, seriously damages our foreign-policy interests when disclosed, and deeply divides the intelligence community because it detracts from normal intelligence functions. Something is amiss when the director of Central Intelligence spends much of his time managing insurgents in Central America.

Covert action should not be ruled out, but is must be viewed with a skepticism that has been little in evidence in the Reagan Administration. Congress must continue to exercise and improve its oversight. There should be annual review of every covert action, and such review should be ongoing in particular cases. Review should begin with an examination of the general authority and proceed to an explicit description of goals, means and a timetable.

However, covert operations should not be seen as the primary aim of the intelligence community. We need to give a higher priority to intelligence. When we put a premium on intelligence during World War II, it was excellent. The quality declined when our preeminence in the world, and the remoteness of nuclear war, made intelligence seem less important. We realize now how wrong we were to let ourselves slip.

There has been rapid growth in the intelligence budget in the last five years. New collection systems authorized by Congress, together with computerization, have enhanced intelligence analysis. Now we must stress cost-effectiveness—making sure that each funding increase will bring a corresponding increase in the quality of intelligence.

Intelligence should be de-politicized; too often it seems to be used to justify political views. Nor should political appointees dominate the analytical functions of the intelligence community. The signs that I have seen in the past eight years are mixed: The National Intelligence Estimate, the

most refined analysis available, is more open to politically unpopular views, but I deplore the attempts to bestow the directorship of the CIA on political friends. (President Reagan succeeded in this; President Carter did not.) Such appointments suggest that support for policy is more important than good analysis.

We should increase competition among analysts. Some of our recent intelligence failures may have occurred because key data and correct conclusions were washed away in a consensus-seeking process before reaching the Oval Office. More competition means that analysts must be free to speak up, to disagree and challenge. It also means opening up channels of dissent and allowing competing estimates from different agencies and outside academic experts. This process must continue.

More should be done to disseminate the information on which intelligence is based. The collection of information by various agencies leads to a compartmentalization of knowledge. Thus, analysts may not have access to critical facts already in the government's possession. This problem persists because of the natural bureaucratic tendency to view information as the property of the agency collecting it.

Finally, congressional oversight must remain vigilant and get the information it requires from the executive branch. The intelligence committees conduct their review behind closed doors, without public

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witnesses whose expert opinions might otherwise be taken into account. Thus, they must be thorough in their work, and take special care to see that other committees are advised of significant intelligence activities falling under their jurisdiction.

The intelligence committees have done their best work when they ask the broad policy-related questions that Congress is best equipped to ask. For example, soon the committees ought to examine the transfer of military equipment to foreign countries outside normal congressional review. Also, they should study our ability to monitor nuclear-arms agreements.

Years of service on the intelligence panel have persuaded me that a great power cannot survive without an intelligence community. I am willing to support covert action undertaken for sound reasons, but I am tired of overseas adventures that undermine our interests and end in national embarrassment. A strong role for Congress, working with the executive branch, is crucial for the kind of effective intelligence on which the foreign policy of our nation can be confidently based.

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